Home Office’s secretive anti-extremism comms unit signs £1m media monitoring deal

RICU facility signs two-year contract

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By Sam Trendall

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A mysterious communications unit within the Home Office that aims to combat extremism has signed a £1m deal for “media monitoring and evaluation services”.

The prosaically named Research, Information and Communications Unit forms part of the Prevent Directorate housed within the Homeland Security Group of the home affairs department. According to a current job advert for three vacant campaign manager positions, RICU’s remit includes “developing and implementing evidence-based campaigns and behaviour change activity in support of national security priorities”.

Recruitment efforts and procurement notices are among of the few occasions on which – albeit limited – information on the work of RICU is published openly. Despite having been founded 15 years ago, there are fewer than 10 mentions of RICU anywhere on GOV.UK, including the site’s archives of thousands of announcements, documents, and ministerial speeches.

The unit has, however, made headlines at various points over the years over what is seen as an underhand approach. RICU is understood to have conceived and orchestrated various campaigns – particularly anti-extremism initiatives involving British Muslims – which have then launched under the pretence of being grassroots projects, with no overt government involvement in their creation.

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Despite these controversies, the unit remains very in operation – and seemingly well funded.

Its latest external contract covers the provision of media monitoring services provided by specialist firm Press Data. Newly published commercial information reveals that RICU signed a two-year deal on 14 January.

The contract, which is valued at £1.07m, was awarded via the Media Monitoring and Associated Services framework, a three-year £10m procurement vehicle put in place in 2020 to allow public sector organisations to “monitor and analyse media coverage of public communications activity across multiple channels, including broadcast, online and social media”.

“Designed in collaboration with the Government Communication Service, this agreement provides services to monitor, analyse and evaluate media coverage,” according to the Crown Commercial Service. “Customers can also access self-service tools to monitor and analyse social media.”

RICU’s media-monitoring contract comes on top of a number of other – much larger – engagements with external analysis, research and PR firms. In October 2019, the unit awarded atrio three-year deals: a £4.9m contract with Moonshot for social media analysis; and two deals for research and evaluation – respectively worth £14.9m and £2m – with Kantar and Ipsos Mori, respectively. The latter applied to international operations, procurement notices indicate.

Between 2016 and 2019, RICU retained Ripjar on a £1.66m contract to provide a “propaganda tracker and dashboard”.

A £50m deal with comms heavyweight M&C Saatchi – which was contracted to provide “communications services” – was due to conclude at the end of last month. A £30m engagement with Adam Smith International, which was contracted to serve as “global delivery partner”, ran for two years until March 2021.

Sam Trendall is editor of CSW sister title PublicTechnology, where this story first appeared